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Renewable Energy Vermont

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Title: Meeting Stirs New Thinking on Solar Potential

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SHREWSBURY — Friday night's solar-update meeting was billed as an update for the public on solar industry developments. But it may also mark renewed interest in residential and community solar projects.

Davis Terrell, solar project manager for Green Earth Energy, a subsidiary of McKernon Group Inc. in Brandon, updated the crowd of a dozen people, most of them interested in residential solar energy. During the meeting, Joan Aleshire, president of the Shrewsbury Library and coordinator of the solar update, asked whether the town could benefit from a solar array that powers town public buildings, such as the Town Hall, library and fire department.

"I thought if I started asking questions, that it could happen," Aleshire said in an interview. Terrell said during the meeting that a vote by the town would be needed for such a project.

"The Shrewsbury Mountain School Board did a lot of work that resulted in the spring of last year in the solar array atop the elementary school," he said. "While it's more difficult to do a project on a rooftop than in a field, there's nothing that rules out a field array. They're easy to site, with galvanized pipe into the ground and above-ground weighting with anchor blocks so they stay in place."

Terrell said some discussion had also taken place on the board of Mill River Union High School in North Clarendon about a solar array at that school "with a possible site on the south side of the parking lot."

He cited the work of Sarah Bolster, a board member for Shrewsbury Mountain School in accomplishing its solar project last year.

Bolster said Saturday, "At the time we were working to bring the Mountain School project to completion, we were also talking to town officials about what was needed for town facilities. The town's garage is new. We encouraged the Select Board to design its roof to handle weight from solar panels, to give the town the best possibility for such a project."

According to Bolster, the Shrewsbury Select Board is interested in a town solar project.

"We were discussing the possibility as part of a three-to-five-year plan to accomplish this for the town," she said. "But we got busy completing the Mountain School project and haven't had another meeting."

Selectman Steven Nicholson recalled Saturday, "We had a meeting with Sarah Bolster about solar panels on the town garage. As I recall, it didn't work out because of the rate structure. The town would be classified as a commercial organization."

The Shrewsbury Mountain School project, while a possible model for town efforts, enjoyed financial benefits that the town may not currently be able to replicate. Bolster said that the school project was preceded by years of groundwork, and discussion and action about renewable energy and student health took place.

“By the time we learned that the Vermont Clean Energy Development Fund, appropriated by the Legislature, had grants available for school solar projects, we were able to use matching funds in the school budget,” Bolster said. “So it came together quickly and we never had to bond for the school’s share.”

Aleshire didn’t know names of others who might support her community solar project idea.

“But I think friends of the town library, those associated with the Shrewsbury Institute for Agricultural Education, the town’s Conservation Commission, and those at Friday night’s update might be interested,” she said.

Terrell’s talk highlighted opportunities for both community solar and residential solar investments.

“A recent IRS ruling opened the door for Boardman Hill Solar Farm, with its Vermont families and small business owners to each share tax benefits according to their shares in the venture,” he said. “Which means if you have a 10 percent stake in a community solar project whose costs total \$100,000, then you can claim a \$10,000 investment, entitling you to a \$3,000 renewable energy tax credit.”

Federal renewable energy tax credits are scheduled to be reduced, however.

“The current 30 percent tax credit subsidy will remain for the next three years, then scale down to 10 percent after 2021,” Terrell said. “This feature of the tax code has been a big driver for the economics of renewable energy projects.”

Green Mountain Power reached its quota for buying residential power, he said, but the state doesn’t plan to curb small solar projects.

“This is good news for homeowners or cooperative projects where the array would be sited in a neighborhood of solar power users, as long as they are less than 15 kilowatts — a large household system,” Terrell said.

He addressed the controversy over selling renewable energy credits, or RECs, early in his talk.

“Most people don’t consider RECs in household projects, but you can elect to retain them or forfeit them to your utility,” he said. “It doesn’t apply to people off the grid. Those who retain RECs can later sell, but it’s a hassle for homeowners with little return.”

One of the members of the audience supported Terrell’s view with a twist: “Electrons just don’t care about them.”

Terrell said Aleshire recently requested the solar update.

“My last solar talk was in the Town Hall two or three years ago,” he said.
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RUTLAND, Vt. -

Across the United States more people are becoming energy efficient, including in Rutland, as it was just designated the solar city capital of New England.

There was a block party celebrating the sunny new title Tuesday night. The city, along with Vermont's largest utility, teamed up to make Rutland a shining example of where it thinks the country is going when it comes to renewable energy.

Rob McClallen is a lifelong Rutland resident. He's lived in his house for the past 26 years. In May, he installed 48 solar panels on his south side facing roofs.

"The configuration that we have on the roof provides 85 to 100 percent of our utility bills," said McClallen.

His solar project and 50 others around the city mean Rutland is the solar capital of New England.

"It was a community that was determined and had a lot of grit in terms of the transformation," said Green Mountain Power CEO Mary Powell.

It took Green Mountain Power along with the city three years and 7.87 megawatts of solar power to achieve the designation. That's the most solar generation per capita of any city in New England. It's enough energy to power 1,600 homes.

Solar is increasingly popular with arrays popping up across the state. The quick growth is fueling criticism about solar sprawl wiping out Vermont's landscape. But Powell says that's not GMP's mission.

"We're kind of in love with rooftop solar, we love the idea of fostering that because when you have it closer to load it makes it the most resilient, most effective option of the future," said Powell.

Currently there's a 30 percent federal tax break for an unlimited number of solar projects. But that write-off will drop to 10 percent at the end of 2016.

Reporter Gina Bullard: Does some of the spark of solar go away when that incentive goes away?

Powell: I believe that because the cost is coming down anyway, that we'll still see meaningful solar in the future.

As for McClallen, he now loves getting his utility bill and living in a city with a bright new title.

"Rutland is a great place to be and this is just once more accolade we're happy about that," said McClallen.

GMP may be focusing on solar power Tuesday, but it makes up just a small percentage of its energy portfolio at less than 3 percent.